

As we each contend with how we will personally do our part to ensure that all people can live where they want, free from oppression, we would do well to remind ourselves of Congressman Lewis's famous agitation to go out and make trouble, "good trouble, necessary trouble." Without it, we will never fulfill the second part of the Torah's obligation to ensure that people with a familial history of slavery are able to choose where they live and live freely in all aspects of their lives.

We may like to believe about ourselves that of course we would have protected the slave who had escaped. But we must also ask ourselves—what are we doing today? Because however we are personally grappling with and addressing racial injustice today is probably a lot like how we would have reacted then.

May we be blessed to make good and necessary trouble that will allow us to tell our children and grandchildren that in this time of reckoning we helped ensure that freedom from oppression for all people is real.

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Ki Tetzei 5780

כי תצא תש"ף



Who Are We?

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The Jewish master narrative hinges on retelling our own story of being enslaved and freed by God to become a holy people. We tell this story repeatedly, and it is meant to wash over our souls and permeate our brains. Enslavement should feel real, as should the taste of freedom.

What if you were a slave and had been able to escape? Would you have expected to find people who would help protect you or people who would turn you in?

If you had been the person to encounter a slave who had fled, would you have protected them and become complicit in their escape, or followed local laws and returned them to their master?

This is among the topics that Ki Tetzei invites us to consider—but with clear direction.

In Deuteronomy 23:16-17 we learn: "Don't deliver a slave to his master if he seeks refuge with you. Rather allow him to reside among you, wherever he chooses within any of your cities where it is good for him. You shall not oppress him."

This summer, as our country is reckoning with race and the 400-year legacy of slavery, I have been thinking a lot about Frederick Douglass. On September 3, 1838, Douglass, with significant help from his soon-to-be wife, Anna Murray-Douglass, escaped from slavery, traveling north by train and steamship.

He became active as an abolitionist and preacher. Yet his freedom did not translate into love of country. In 1847 he wrote, “I have no love for America, as such; I have no patriotism. I have no country. What country have I? The institutions of this country do not recognize me as a man” (“Country, Conscience and the Anti-Slavery Cause: An Address Delivered in New York City,” May 11, 1847). He had taken bold action to assert his own human dignity. But patriotism is more than an individual act of pride for one’s country. It requires you to see yourself as part of the nation’s project, and America at that time would not grant Douglass the full human experience of choosing to live as he wanted, and particularly, where he wanted.

Jewish text and tradition regularly challenge us and raise questions for today. But on the topics of the slave’s transition to freedom and how to treat poor people, our texts offer a usable framework that doesn’t require us to stretch. They inspire us towards righteousness.

Not only do we learn to protect a slave who has escaped and to offer refuge, we also learn about prioritizing the dignity of those in our debt. We are told that when we go to collect the debt we should wait outside, aiming to prevent the debtor from feeling any shame about their home—a feeling to which many of us can relate now when Zoom meetings show off our homes to everyone.

If they’ve given us a coat as collateral for a loan, we are to return it to them each night, in case they rely on it for warmth. We are to pay laborers on the day they do the work, not letting them languish and suffer as they await funds that are rightfully theirs. We don’t collect all of our produce from the fields but leave some for anonymous hungry people who can wander in to retrieve it. And we use weights and measurements that are just because anyone who is perpetuating injustice is an abomination to God. On these matters of justice, our instructions are clear.

Yet despite the Torah’s clarity, I’m struck by the ways upholding these laws would not have been simple. Going back to our first example, I contemplate how a Jew would have made sense of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which required slaves to be returned to their owners, regardless of whether you lived in a slave or free state. It even required

the government to take responsibility for finding, returning, and trying escaped slaves.

What would you have done if you encountered a slave who had escaped? As a Jew, your master story reminded you daily you’d been enslaved and freed—but, as a Jew, you also had a religious principle that we follow the law of the land, a law requiring you to return the slave. And what if you worked for the government and were doubly bound to seek out fugitives and return them?

If you decided not to return the slave, how would you honor the second part of the obligation, to allow the now freed person to live wherever they wanted and to not oppress them?

In the US, we are living through a period of reckoning with who we are as a nation, where we’ve come from, and where we are headed and that means coping in a deep historical, ethical, and spiritual way with the issue of slavery.

In 1865 the 13th Amendment officially abolished slavery, but in the years that followed Black Americans really did not have the freedom to which the Torah aspires. They were limited by laws, policies, and practices that determined where they could live, if they could get credit to buy a home, and if they would feel welcomed; new regulations were regularly established to constrict their rights

This July 4th, many listened to Frederick Douglass’s speech, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”, in which Douglass explains that it is not a day that symbolizes freedom for Black people who were enslaved and did not receive independence in 1776. *How*, he asks, *should Black Americans engage with this day, the day of another people?* It is important to realize that we are not yet done with this question of how and where a person who was formerly a slave can live in this country. The ethical quandary about returning a slave who had escaped is not limited to the past. Each July 4th—and every day in between—each of us makes choices that either advance or impede equity for all people, regardless of race.

This summer we mourned the loss of Congressman John Lewis, the great civil rights leader who worked tirelessly to ensure that inheritors of the legacy of slavery could live wherever they wanted and not be oppressed.